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ABSTRACT

Some researchers have reported that when parents are the main source of sex education, their adolescent children are less likely to engage in premarital sexual activity and are more likely to use effective contraception. This study used the variables of gender and parental sexual attitudes (liberal or conservative) to categorize 349 college students and one of their parents into four groups. The relationship between family communication about sexuality and adolescent sexual behavior, attitudes, knowledge, and contraceptive use was examined. This relationship differed as a function of gender, parental sexual attitudes, and source of information about communication. Based on student communication reports, only the sexual behavior of girls with liberal parents was related to parent-child communication about sex, but the sexual knowledge and contraceptive use of boys with liberal parents were positively related to sexual communication with parents. Based on parent communication reports, daughters of liberal and conservative parents were more likely to be sexually active if they had talked to their parents about sex. In both cases, there was a significant positive correlation between family sexual communication and conservative sexual attitudes for males with conservative parents. (Author/NB)

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Parental Sexual Attitudes, Family Sexual Communication, and Adolescent Sexual Behavior

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Abstract

The variables of gender and parental sexual attitudes (liberal or conservative) were used to categorize 349 college students and one of their parents into four groups. The relationship between family communication about sexuality and adolescent sexual behavior, attitudes, knowledge, and contraceptive use was examined and it was determined that this relationship differs as a function of gender, parental sexual attitudes, and source of the information about communication. Based on the communication reports of the students, only the sexual behavior of females with liberal parents was related to parent-child communication about sex, but the sexual knowledge and contraceptive use of males with liberal parents were positively related to sexual communication with parents. When using the parents' reports of communication, daughters of both liberal and conservative parents were more likely to be sexually active if they had talked to their parents about sex. In both cases, there was a significant positive correlation between family sexual communication and conservative sexual attitudes for males with conservative parents. Researchers should be cautious in drawing conclusions about the relationship between family sexual communication and adolescent sexual behavior unless the data are analyzed separately for male and female subjects, conservative and liberal parents, and adolescents' and parents' reports of communication about sexuality.

Parental Sexual Attitudes, Family Sexual Communication, and Adolescent Sexual Behavior

Some researchers have reported that when parents are the main source of sex education, their adolescent children are less likely to engage in premarital sexual activity (Lewis, 1973; Spanier, 1977) and are more likely to use effective contraception (Fox & Inazu, 1980; Furstenberg, 1971). Indeed, for many years this relationship has been touted as one the primary advantages of parent-child discussions about aspects of sexuality. Recently, however, the results of numerous studies have raised doubts as to the extent of family influence on adolescent sexuality (Darling & Hicks, 1982; Fisher, 1988; Herceg-Baron & Furstenberg, 1982; Newcomer & Udry, 1985).

Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg (1986) have suggested that communication about sexuality between parents and adolescents is only likely to have a relationship to adolescent premarital sexual behavior if the parents have traditional (conservative) attitudes and if the adolescent is a female. In their study, traditional parents who had discussed sexuality with their female offspring had daughters who were significantly less likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse. Sexual communication was unrelated to sexual behavior for sons of traditional parents and all children of moderate/liberal parents. This finding, however, was based on data from 15 to 16 year old subjects and their parents, and the measure of attitudes was based on three questions dealing with marriage and family life and not on sexuality per se. In addition, the measure of family communication about sexuality was a dichotomous one ("yes" or

"no") which is the least informative way of obtaining this measure. Hence, before the conclusions of Moore et al. become part of the knowledge base in the field of adolescent sexuality, their hypothesis should be tested using a different sample, a more specific measure of parental sexual attitudes, and a more refined measure of family sexual communication. I happened to have such a data base available (see Fisher, 1988) and wondered if parental sexual attitudes were an intervening variable that I had neglected in my original data analyses. Thus I hypothesized that premarital sexual activity would be related to parent-child sexual communication among daughters of sexually conservative parents, but not for any of the other subjects.

Method

Subjects were 217 female and 132 male never-married students between the ages of 18 and 24 who attended a major midwestern university and one or both parents of these students. Two-thousand main and regional campus students and their parents were chosen randomly and were sent questionnaires in the mail. The return rate was 27% for the students, 22% for mothers and 17% for fathers. Fifty-eight percent of the paricipating students lived at home with their parents. For a thorough description of the subject sample, see Fisher (1988).

The Sexual Attitude Scale (Hudson, Murphy, & Nurius, 1983) was used as the sexual attitude measurement instrument for both parents and students. This 25-item instrument measures general sexual conservatism or liberalism and yields a score ranging from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting greater conservatism.

The reported coefficient alpha for this test is .92.

Family communication about sex was measured by asking subjects to report on a scale of zero to four the extent to which nine specific sexual topics had been discussed between the child and each parent. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this measure is .93 for parents and .87 for late adolescents (Fisher, 1987).

In order to measure sexual and contraceptive knowledge, the Miller-Fisk Sexual Knowledge Test (Gough, 1974) was given to the students. This test has a multiple-choice and true-false format which yields scores ranging from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating greater sexual knowledge, and has an odd-even reliability coefficient of .67.

Sexual activity of the adolescent subjects was determined by the question, "Have you ever had sexual intercourse?" Those who had were asked to indicate their age at first intercourse and the number of sexual partners. These students were also asked to indicate by means of a multiple-choice type format what type of contraceptive, if any, they had used at first coitus, what type of contraceptive, if any, they used with their most frequent, present sexual partner, and the percentage of time that contraception was used with this partner.

Each questionnaire had a code number so that the responses of parents and students could be paired after they were returned.

Results

The parent with the highest communication score in each family was designated the primary sex educator and used in the analyses. Parents were categorized as sexually conservative or

sexually liberal by means of a median split. This process was done twice: once based on the students' reports of sexual communication and once based on the parents' reports.

Multiple regression analyses were done using the variables of family sexual communication and age of the subject to predict whether or not the subject had engaged in premarital sexual intercourse for the subjects grouped by gender (male and female) and by sexual attitudes of the primary sex educator (relatively conservative or relatively liberal). Based on the students' reports, parent-child communication about sexuality was a significant predictor of adolescent sexual behavior only for female students with relatively liberal parents. Among these 114 subjects, the multiple R was .26. For the variable of family sexual communication, the unstandardized coefficient was -.01 and the standardized coefficient was -.21, $p < .05$. Age was not a significant predictor. Thus, for these young women with sexually liberal parents, talking to a parent about sex was related to a greater likelihood of engaging in premarital sexual behavior.

Using the communication reports of the parents, parent-child communication about sex was a significant predictor of sexual activity for females from both liberal and conservative families, although age was not. In both of these groups of subjects, greater family communication about sex was related to a greater likelihood of sexual activity. Among the 115 females with relatively liberal parents, the multiple R was .28, and the unstandardized and standardized coefficients were -.01 and -.22 respectively for the variable of parents' report of sexual

communication, $p < .05$. Among the 101 females with relatively conservative parents, the multiple R was .23 and for the variable of communication with parents about sex, the unstandardized coefficient was -.01 and the standardized coefficient was -.20, $p < .05$. In both cases, greater family sexual communication, as perceived by the parents, was related to a greater likelihood that the young women had engaged in sexual intercourse.

Using these same four categories of subjects (males or females with parents who are conservative or liberal), Pearson correlation coefficients were developed to examine the relationship between family communication about sex and sexual attitudes, sexual knowledge, number of sexual partners, age at first coitus, and three measures of effective contraceptive use. The only significant correlation among the female subjects was for those with liberal parents where there was a correlation between family communication about sex and more liberal sexual attitudes, $r(112) = -.24$, $p < .05$. Among the male subjects with sexually conservative parents, there was a significant correlation between family sexual communication and greater sexual conservatism, $r(69) = .39$, $p < .01$. Males with sexually liberal parents were more likely to currently use an effective method of contraception, $r(27) = -.36$, $p < .05$, and more likely to have greater sexual knowledge, $r(26) = .42$, $p < .05$, if they had talked to their parents about sexuality.

Based on the parents' reports of sexual communication, the only significant correlation was between family sexual discussion and greater sexual conservatism for males with sexually conservative parents, $r(69) = .32$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

One should not jump to the conclusion that discussing sex with female adolescents leads to premarital sexual activity. The data simply suggest a relationship between these two variables, and it is entirely likely that if a female adolescent is sexually active, she is more likely to discuss sex with her parents.

While the results of this study are not identical to those of Moore et al. (1986), they are similar in that they point out the necessity to consider parental sexual attitudes before drawing conclusions about the relationship between family sexual communication and adolescent sexual behavior. Categorizing parents as to their sexual attitudes may help clarify some of the inconsistent previous findings about the relationship between parent-child communication about sexuality and adolescent sexual behavior and contraceptive use. Discussion with a sexually conservative parent is likely to be of a different nature than discussion with a more sexually liberal parent.

In addition, this study clearly points out the necessity of recognizing that a report of the extent of family communication about sexuality from the adolescents' reports might yield quite different results than a report from the parents. If it is necessary to choose among these two sources of information rather than to utilize both, then quite clearly it should be the students' reports that are used. It seems to matter less how much discussion actually took place than how much discussion the student perceives to have taken place.

While few would argue that family communication about sex is

not a good thing, the claims that have been made in the past as to its benefits may have to be modified, taking into account the attitudes of the parents, the gender of the adolescent, and the source of information about sexual communication.

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